

Western Sahara: A Difficult Crisis to Resolve

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In 2005 the Sahara's conflict entered its thirtieth year, without anybody being able to talk of victory or defeat on either side. The status quo which has lasted for so many years, and which resembles in so many ways a state of lethargy, has no doubt made it possible to avoid a clear and definite victory of one of the two official antagonists who continue to dispute the sovereignty of the former Spanish Sahara.

During the last year, however, events of varying importance have disturbed this apparent tranquillity. Firstly, from May 2005 onwards there were numerous demonstrations at Laayoun and Smara, involving Saharawis demanding independence for the Sahara. Secondly, in August, an American diplomatic initiative brought about the release of the four hundred and four remaining Moroccan prisoners held by the Polisario Front. Finally, after the successive resignations of James Baker and of Alvaro de Soto, Kofi Annan appointed a new special envoy to the Sahara, Peter Van Walsum. Do these events represent a change in the evolution of this conflict, or are we going to come back to the above status quo because of the lack of a better solution?

Demonstrations in Saharan Towns

Since May 2005, there has been an increasing and repeated number of secessionist demonstrations in the Sahara's

two main towns, with a continuation on the Rabat's campus. Their violent repression produced an explosive atmosphere, especially at the end of October, with the death of a young demonstrator: Hamdi Lambarki.

In reality, this is not the first time there have been demonstrations. In September 1999 Laayoun had in fact experienced a week of police violence towards Saharawi students calling for an increase in their grants and an improvement in their transport facilities. It may be recalled that the revolt was violently suppressed by the Moroccan police, who at the time was under the command of Driss Basri, the minister of the Interior. These incidents, which were the first of their kind, were soon taken in hand by the Moroccan monarchy. Whilst the 1999 demands were of a social nature, six years later, however, the unrest had taken on a fundamentally political character. Although they had no particular links with the Polisario Front, the demonstrators burned Moroccan flags, threw Molotov cocktails and chanted slogans in favour of independence.

The authorities' response to the social demands formulated six years before may have been considered insufficient, and added to the status quo, it is quite possible that this was enough to cause a hardening of the attitude of some Saharawis towards Rabat.

But should we read into these demands a real desire to obtain independence for the region? If so, it may well be asked why the demonstrators had not joined the ranks of the Polisario Front, which logically wanted the movement to join its cause?

In fact another interpretation of the events in Laayoun and Smara seems possible. After the Green March, Hassan II grant-

ed various privileges to this first generation of Saharawis who had helped him to take control of the territory peacefully: some individuals were appointed as "His Majesty's advisers", others were given posts as civil servants, or granted licences to import products from the Canary Islands. In this way an elite was formed which contributed enormously to the integration of the Saharawi people. Thirty years later, these community leaders have no doubt fewer resources to redistribute to the younger generations who are aware that they enjoy fewer privileges than their elders. Some observers consider that a crisis has arisen because of problems of resource management on the part of the ageing Saharawi leaders. According to this theory, the ambitions and needs of the young Saharawis in the towns governed by Rabat could then in some ways be compared to those of the unemployed graduates in Morocco, with the significant difference that the Saharawis have a formidable "secret weapon" in terms of extra negotiating weight with the authorities. By airing their demands for independence, they certainly raise the stakes high enough to make their voices heard. In so doing, however, they implicitly put themselves on a footing of "ruled people" in opposition to the "rulers", acting as part of a national entity.

Be that as it may, even if their demonstrations have the same basic rationale as those of the unemployed Moroccan graduates, by putting the independence issue to the forefront, burning the Moroccan flag and violently attacking the symbols of the authorities in power, they are indirectly appealing to the international community, by giving the impression that this territory for which the United Nations has not yet decided the

status is not under the complete control of Morocco.

A Self-government Difficult to Establish

Faced with this crisis situation, and whichever way it is interpreted, Rabat is obliged to seek a solution for what can be seen directly or indirectly as an unresolved conflict. Whilst proposing "extensive autonomy" for the Western Sahara, Morocco does not specify what this would cover. This reticence could be explained by the political change that such an option would require, involving a new institutional structure and a revision of the Constitution. If autonomy were granted to this region, Morocco would be obliged to reconcile the formal sovereignty of the country, and the actual autonomy of a population that feels the need to affirm its own right to independence. In this case it is not a question of granting a greater or lesser degree of liberty to a region of Morocco, but to Saharawis who have not been subdued even after thirty years of conflict, and who, when it comes to the critical moment, will want to negotiate their sovereignty avidly.

This negotiation will inevitably concentrate on the value of any autonomy offered in terms of administration of the region's natural resources, maintenance of public order, representation of the Saharawi people, and the relationship to be established with the central power, as well as in the field of education and the preparation of school curricula. Suffice it to say that such a degree of autonomy, frequently presented in Morocco as an ideal solution, is not easy to apply. Moreover, this solution does not seem to be unanimously accepted: The Istiqlal Party, which has the impression of having lost its natural role as defender of the national territory's integrity/(unity), contests the principle of autonomy, and prefers to envisage a move towards a regional structure within which the Sahara could be included. Other political groups such as *Alliance et liberté* (Alliance and Freedom) think that the search for a solution to the Saharan issue repre-

sents a chance to open up the political situation in Morocco. For the younger generation in Laayoun and Smara, "the Saharawi people have the right to choose their own destiny". (*Le Monde*, 19-20 February, 2006)

The New American Interest in the Region

Faced with these difficulties, many people in the Maghreb hope that Washington's new interest in the region may help find a solution to a Saharan crisis of which the local populations are in general heartily tired. It certainly seems to be true that the Americans are showing an interest in many different aspects, whether it be security, military, economic or even political issues. Since it has combined political reforms with economic liberalism, the U.S. looks on Morocco in a favourable light, and wishes to encourage good governance there. Washington could moreover possibly wish to rely on its traditional ally in the region if it were decided to enlarge the sphere of operations of the Atlantic Alliance, reserving the option of using the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces as a factor in a strategy of regional stabilisation.

In addition to this, many American companies have invested in the development of Algeria's oil and gas resources, and would like to see a lowering of tension in the region. American intentions are however especially concentrated on controlling the situation better in the Sahel region, which in their eyes has become a sort of "refuge" for Islamic terrorists, whom Saharawis from Tindouf looking for guidance and motivation might be tempted to join. For all these reasons the resolution of the conflict in the Sahara is a necessity, always supposing that a solution acceptable to all those involved can be found. Not having had colonial links with the countries and the populations of the Maghreb region, the U.S. may well be able to succeed where the Europeans have got into deadlock.

If such is to be the case, they will need to take into account the aspirations of the

Sahara's populations, and show considerable imagination when it comes to finding a strategy to resolve the crisis adapted to the time and context. It would certainly not be helpful to confine themselves to envisaging the two solutions currently proposed by those involved: self-determination in the case of the Polisario Front and Algeria, and autonomy in the case of Morocco.

Unlike the European countries which, under the cover of a supposed neutrality, desire a victory for Morocco and hope that the Algerians will be obliged to change their stand, the Americans could introduce a greater element of pragmatism into the search for a solution. They could do this by abandoning the two extreme options that have proved so difficult to attain, and which by definition each imply the legitimisation of one of the parties involved, and the delegitimisation of the other, such is the extent to which each country has identified its own political system with this conflict. Morocco has constantly presented the inviolability of its national territory as a sacred principle, and Algerian politicians endlessly inflame their oratory on the subject of self-determination. The first step towards ending this deadlock is therefore to stop considering as sacrosanct things that have no reason to be so, in other words, the inviolability of the national territory in the case of Morocco, and the right of peoples to self-determination in the case of the Saharawi supporters of the Polisario Front and Algeria. The priority should become not to win a victory over the neighbouring country, but to undertake a real search for a solution to a conflict which also involves men and women who sooner or later will decide their own destiny, and not necessarily through the ballot-box. At this point in time, the Americans seem better equipped than the Europeans to bring about the resolution of this conflict, and to propose intermediate solutions which would allow the parties involved to avoid the feeling of being on the losing side. This obviously depends on whether the parties to the conflict will be ready to accept solutions to the crisis other than self-determination or autonomy.